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WASHINGTON, DC -- The links between Pakistan's military and intelligence officers and the violent extremist religious groups they created must be severed, if peace and stability is to come to the region, said Steve Coll, testifying before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today.

"A stable, modernizing, pluralistic, tolerant, democratic Pakistan at peace with its neighbors and itself is in the interest of the United States, India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan alike," said Mr. Coll, President of The New America Foundation and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "Ghost Wars," today in the Capitol Hill hearing.

Mr. Coll said that Pakistan made a "mistake" in its recent accommodation of Sharia law in the Swat Valley and areas of Northwest Pakistan, and he called on the United States not to compound the error by accepting the Pakistan government's appeasement.

Mr. Coll was one of five experts on Pakistan to give testimony before USCIRF. The others included: former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan William Milam; Ali Dayan Hasan, Senior South Asia Researcher with Human Rights Watch; Azhar Hussain, an expert on Pakistan's religious schools with the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy; and Ayesha Jalal, noted Professor of History at Tufts University and author of "Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia."

This is the third hearing in a series exploring religious extremism and U.S. national security interests. The first was on Sudan, September 24, 2008; the second on Bangladesh, December 4.

Felice Gaer, USCIRF chair, opened the hearing and moderated the wide-ranging discussion on the problems faced by the Obama administration in dealing with the region.  
"This hearing on religious freedom in Pakistan is important because it shows that the

complex, multi-layered problems facing Pakistan, the United States, and the region cannot be solved without understanding the links between some elements of Pakistan's government and military and the religious extremists," said Ms. Gaer. She said Pakistan's blasphemy laws, religious schools, apparent government tolerance of violence toward minority religions, growth in extremist organizations, and sponsorship of "anti-defamation" laws at the United Nations all constitute serious concerns.

Ayesha Jalal said Pakistan aspires to universal standards of religious freedom and the United States must require accountability on human rights, but not through coercion or condescension. According to Dr. Jalal, reformation of Pakistan's judicial system is key.

"The United States must engage and be on the side of Pakistan's dynamic civil society as it struggles to redirect the country toward the path of moderation and the goal of social justice," said Dr. Jalal. "If America is to isolate terrorists it must avoid ...isolating the Pakistani people."

In addition to Ms. Gaer, USCIRF Commissioners Talal Y. Eid, Nina Shea, Leonard Leo, Michael Cromartie and Elizabeth H. Prodromou participated.

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